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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the complex issues that block the language teacher's progress towards better teaching and learning. The issues are problematic, for they involve political, financial, organizational, and sociological concerns. All teachers need encouragement in the form of central support, improved career prospects, and value attributed to language learning to improve the current low morale in the profession. Research should focus on possible problems in instructional objectives, methods, teacher training, and teaching conditions that would explain the limited accomplishements of the field. Portions of recent British studies concerning language teaching needs make recommendations for testing, especially criterion-referencing, and language learning competence that should be pursued. The priority of research should not be to find an objective truth about language learning but to describe what appears to work in the classroom, so that teachers can examine and change their own behavior. (MSE)

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RESEARCH AND THE TEACHER OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

BRIAN PAGE

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4. Research and the teacher of foreign languages in secondary schools

Brian Page

My brief is 'to bring out teachers' views of what blocks the progress they are trying to make towards better teaching/learning, what they want to know more about in the area of L2 learning.'

What teachers feel blocks progress is frequently a complex of political, financial, organisational and sociological issues which are not perhaps what we want to discuss here. But we must be aware of them and keep them constantly in mind when we are deciding whatever courses of action we eventually wish to take. Otherwise all our deliberations here will be so much hot air and will as quickly disperse.

At a general political level all teachers, and language teachers among them, need encouragement. It is a long time since morale in the profession was as low as it is now. It is disheartening, for example, that 'comprehensive school' has become for so many people a pejorative term, a situation that appears to be encouraged rather than otherwise by our current political masters. More specifically, the study of language needs encouragement by being placed firmly in any core curriculum envisaged. It has not helped matters that in the current hiving off of sections of educational responsibility to the Manpower Services Commission's Youth Training Scheme and into new structures like Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI), all of which are supposed to be concerned with 'relevance' and 'the real world', the study of foreign languages plays virtually no part. It is to be hoped that the curriculum suggestions that will come from the revised version of the DES consultative paper on foreign languages in the school curriculum (Department of Education and Science/Welsh Office, 1983) will express a good deal more strongly a policy of positive encouragement to teach more languages to more people than the document does at present: and this for two pressing reasons that can produce two suggestions for research. First, the range of languages being taught in secondary schools in this country is contracting. It is very probable than within a very few years now there will be virtually no Russian or Italian taught at this level. The Schools Council has already investigated this problem (Schools Council, 1982). It still needs to be taken further. What precisely are the factors that have led to this situation? What are the courses of action that could redress it? Why are those courses of action not being pursued? Second, at present, nationally (though there are strong pockets of resistance, particularly where graded objectives schemes are in operation), two-thirds of our

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secondary school pupils give up foreign language learning at the earliest opportunity, that is at the public examinations option year, typically, at age 14+. There are many reasons for this. What are they? How can the situation be improved? If the situation is improved, are the authorities at local and national level willing to solve the organisational problems that arise? Quite simply, if we manage to persuade two-thirds of our pupils to continue learning a language after age 14+, that would mean we would need a lot more language teachers, textbooks, materials, etc. Would that situation be welcomed and dealt with? If not, there is no point in our trying. I know already of schools where pupils who would like to go on learning languages have to be told they cannot because there are not enough teachers to teach them.

Language teachers could do with encouragement from society at large too. We know why many people feel that learning a foreign language is not really a worthwhile activity - the fact that English is an international language is apparent enough. But there is surely more to it than that. We should take a lead from our mathematics colleagues. They have managed to persuade society in general that everyone needs a full-scale secondary school mathematics course. Most jobs seem to require a qualification in English and maths when we all know that the great mass of the population, including most of us here, needs no more than the ordinary computational skills that we learnt in primary schools. I am not suggesting that maths should be downgraded - it has a general educational value - but it has been sold to everyone on its utilitarian value. A knowledge of one or more foreign languages is at least as useful as secondary school mathematics. How do we convince people of that?

One final point about the encouragement of teachers. Because of a dramatically falling school population as well as lack of money, career prospects are blocked. It has been estimated for the city of Leeds that, by the year 2000, 85% of teachers will still be in precisely the same job as they are now. Over the next fifteen years or so only 15% are likely to move because of retirement, redeployment or promotion. This is discouraging, particularly at a time when reforms are needed. What can be done about it?

To get to matters to do more directly with language teaching/learning: why is it that most of our learners appear to perform so modestly after something like 500 hours of instruction? Are the objectives wrong? Are the methods wrong? Are the teachers generally poor? Are the conditions wrong? Or is language learning so complex and difficult a business that what our current pupils do is in fact all that can be expected?

1. Are the objectives wrong?

As far as behaviour, performance or skills to be acquired are

concerned, most current 'O' level and CSE syllabuses either do not state any objectives at all or couch them in language so general that it is meaningless. Graded objectives schemes, on the other hand, have always defined fairly precisely what a learner at a given level should be able to do. These definitions are usually in terms of a task and not in terms of the level of linguistic complexity which may be displayed within the completion of the task. This is an area which needs investigation. Some definitions of objectives in terms of the body of knowledge to be acquired, that is, words and structures to be known, have existed since the beginning of CSE in 1964 and they have proliferated in the past few years. There is a current controversy that if really communicative objectives are to be aimed at, then a syllabus defining vocabulary and grammar will be more of a straitjacket than a crutch (Page, 1983). We have enough experience now of both types of definition for an investigation to be made. How can we best define a syllabus to encourage communicative competence?

2. Are the methods wrong?

I am quite sure that there is not a method which, irrespective of other circumstances, is more likely than others to bring about effective learning. David Wilkins pointed out years ago (Wilkins, 1974) that we all know teachers who appear to succeed in turning out successful language learners by methods we would sharply criticise. Many of us are survivors of the gradus ad Parnassum approach described by John Trim (Trim, 1980), so we can hardly say that that was unsuccessful. It would seem, therefore, that in any methodology there will be elements which are more desirable than others. Can these be isolated? Is a successful methodology above all one in which the teacher herself profoundly believes? Is it one which is more teacher-directed or more student-centred? Are there categories of learner that can be described by ability (however that is to be measured), age, social class, or whatever for whom a different mix of methodological elements is appropriate? It would seem so - after all, one does not present material to an infant class and an adult class in the same way. I would guess too that there are different learning problems involved for a middle-class child going to Leeds Grammar School and for another child a couple of miles away across the city, going to an inner city high school in an area where the unemployment rate is probably about 25% (and more if you are black, which many of the pupils will be). Yet proponents of particular methods, from the Direct Method through the Audio-Lingual Method up to current approaches like the Silent Way, always seem to present a monolithic system.

3. Are the teachers poor?

We would expect that it is through their judgement that teachers can gauge what methods work best. Or can they? Or can they be trained

to? We should remember at this point just how much British secondary school teachers do. The British average work load of 30 lessons a week plus departmental and other meetings, parents' evenings, pastoral care, school journeys, stamp clubs, choir and so on is higher, often much higher, than in most other countries, and particularly than in schools in western Europe. We will not get much improvement in teaching/learning and in teacher education until that is recognised. But how do you convince anyone that our secondary school teachers are being required to work too hard so that most have little time or energy for self-improvement?

We must remember also, however shocking it might be for us, that the majority of teachers do not read books on professional matters, they do not read articles, they are not members of the language associations and therefore do not go to branch meetings or receive the journals. They must be reached through massive and compulsory in-service training programmes. And those programmes should first concern themselves with what an outsider sees that teachers need. Every parent knows what researchers in the last few years have been finding out - that communication in the classroom is an extraordinary and chancy business. The implied conventions and the expected behaviours are often very curious and difficult to learn. This sort of knowledge is only just beginning to get through to teachers in general and needs to be collected for language teachers in particular. The old question-and-answer routine is a good example. Just what is happening when a teacher asks a question in a foreign language classroom? It is clear from my experience as a teaching practice supervisor that teachers' questions have, as often as not, a dampening rather than an encouraging effect. Yet language teaching depends heavily upon them. Studies in York and Stirling have begun to observe teacher behaviour in language classrooms. We need more of this, but we need more studies of pupil behaviour too.

Have we, in fact, concentrated too much on the teacher to the detriment of the learner? Much work has been done, in the teaching of English as a foreign language, on learner-centred schemes. Methods like the Silent Way and Community Language Learning shift the responsibility on to the learner to do his or her own finding out instead of sitting there having material presented to him/her. Very little has been done about this in foreign language learning in this country. It is significant that when the York group (Language Teaching Research Project, Language Teaching Centre, University of York) wanted to find out about successful language teaching they went, not to look at successful learners, but to look at 'good' teachers. These were defined as those who were considered good by HMI and advisers. The consideration of the assessment of the pupils of these teachers was abandoned at an early stage in the investigation so we never found out if the 'good' teachers produced good learners. It is not surprising therefore to discover that all the teachers in the study appear to be involved in highly teacher-directed forms of

teaching. Yet is this the best way? Is there not room and should there not be room, as a general educational objective, for pupils to decide for themselves, at least in part, what they will learn or how they will learn it, or at least to be encouraged to express their own meanings rather than have words constantly put into their mouths by closed-ended questions? That is something we should perhaps attempt to find out. I would hope that, in finding out, we would arrive at elements of a methodology which could be applied by the ordinary teacher, the usual one. I get rather impatient when confronted in the literature by methods which can only be followed by the 'good' teacher who, by definition, is in a minority.

4. Are the conditions wrong?

Is it realistic to hope to teach a foreign language for 40 minutes a day when the rest of the 24 hours militates against its acquisition as a communicative instrument - the situation that Eric Hawkins has described on many occasions as 'gardening in a gale'? There has been for some years now discussion over the counter-claims of the 'drip-feed' technique of a lesson a day versus intensive courses. In fact, the 40-minute lesson five times a week, which was traditional a few years ago when the secondary school curriculum was much narrower than it is now, has frequently given way these days to a nominal four periods of 35 minutes, often organised as two doubles of 70 minutes each. Many schools have experimented with intensive courses of one sort or another, the best known being Archbishop Michael Ramsey School, Camberwell (Cross, 1981). That research needs to be replicated and expanded to see to what extent a different sort of timetable arrangement for foreign language learning is feasible in schools and how effective it can be in producing good learners.

Two recent documents, Recommended statement of the GCE and CSE Boards' Joint Council for 16+ national criteria and the DES consultative paper Foreign languages in the school curriculum, contain several matters that are worthy of research. I wish to mention only three which appear to be the most important.

In the context of the recent discussion of the possible amalgamation of CSE and 'O' level, the Secretary of State required from the examination boards statements of national criteria for the new examinations. The Working Party for French set up by the examination boards produced first a set of draft criteria. These were made available to all interested parties; individual teachers, schools, language associations and others were encouraged to submit comments. A questionnaire was also sent to all secondary schools. On the basis of this a final report, the Recommended statement of 16+ national criteria (in National Congress on Languages in Education, 1984, p 106-15), was sent to the Secretary of State. Like all documents which try to express a consensus it has some muddy, ambiguous parts and some apparently contradictory parts but it remains extremely important as

it is the only expression of the collective will of the foreign language teaching community in this country. Such an exercise has never been done before and it is unlikely to be repeated for a long time. By its nature it is concerned with aims and objectives, syllabus definition and assessment and it is in these areas that it raises questions needing investigation. The first of the seven aims given for the school course up to age 16+ is: 'to develop the ability to use French effectively for purposes of practical communication'. In the context of foreign language secondary school teaching that has a meaning that is fairly obvious - pupils are taught to make appropriate utterances in given communicative situations rather than to translate la plume de ma tante. On the other hand it does beg all the questions about what communication is and how it is developed/taught/learnt. If we look at communication, as David Wilkins does in his paper, then it becomes very alarming because, as he says, 'the process is staggering in its complexity'. We all then wonder how on earth we are to teach it. And yet people of the meanest intelligence in the poorest conditions manage to acquire communicative competence, and not only in one but in several languages. It is as natural as walking, to the human race as a whole. It cannot then be all that difficult to do, however difficult it may be to describe. In terms of research, therefore, we should spend less time in describing what the process of communication is and more in finding out what enables it to take place, that is, how do successful language learners arrive at their success? But in that area we tend to look for the all-embracing theory - Krashen's being the latest as Steven McDonough points out in his paper. This seems to me a blind alley. So far, all theories of learning in general and language learning in particular which attempt to give a total explanation have been found to be deficient. Moreover, a theory of learning that does not take into account the fact that, for example, the subject is 13, male, has come breakfastless from a cold home and is likely to face long-term unemployment in a couple of years' time, is of little use in today's secondary school. It is for this reason that I would disagree with Vivian Cook's remark (in a short paper circulated to conference participants) that progress can be made only 'when it is based on a coherent accurate picture of L2 learning'. There seems to be no evidence, and I certainly have no belief, that we shall ever have a coherent and accurate picture of L2 learning. We should concentrate less on chasing the Holy Grail of the universal constant and more on the description of cases of successful learning, trying to describe all the observable elements in those cases, so that teachers can take from them the ones that seem best to fit their own purpose and situation.

In testing the Recommended statement raises problems which are well known and which still need investigation; in particular, criterion-referencing. How is one to define criteria and how decide when a criterion has been satisfied? Is it possible to say that there are levels of performance in satisfying a criterion, or is that contra-

dictbry? On what grounds, apart from arbitrary intuition, does one establish a hierarchy of criteria so that a progression can be made from one to the next? What is the relationship between the sets of criteria we have in Graded Objectives schemes for example, relating mainly to language functions, and a grammatical progression? Can a communicatively valid grammatical progression be described? There exists a vast amount of material in Graded Objectives schemes that could yield most interesting evidence if they were the basis for a research project. If there is a tension between teaching and learning communicative competence, then that between acquiring it and testing it is enormous. Nevertheless, how is communicative competence best tested? And how is it to be tested in ways that reflect effective teaching/learning but do not lead to distorting practices in language classrooms?

The DES document is a consultative paper and I want to pick up only one point from it because it has not been expressed in quite this form elsewhere. Paragraph 8 states: 'For many pupils [and here the rest of the paragraph shows the DES is thinking of less able ones, not those going on for further training], theirs [i.e. the schools'] is the limited but important task of providing a foundation for language learning competence.' Here, then, it is not communicative competence in a given language that is the goal, but the teaching of a general language learning skill that can be applied to any language. How is that done? Does learning one foreign language do it? Or is it better to learn smatterings of two or three? Does that have implications for two-language courses leading to two-language qualifications, that is, a CSE or 'O' level in French and German together rather than separately? If we have two-language degrees why can we not have two-language qualifications at lower levels, including 'A' level? Learning how to learn a language is something that needs investigation, since it applies to all school pupils and not only to the least able.

I would however emphasise that the priority of research should fall not on the quest for an elusive objective truth but on the collection and description of what appears to work in some cases - descriptions of successful learners, successful teachers and successful methodological elements - so that teachers' own behaviours may be illuminated. Moreover it is of limited use to describe these things only once. A collection of case studies from Stirling (such as Rosamond Mitchell has already given us) will scarcely percolate through to Yorkshire. We need to set up such methodological study groups in each area so that local collections of effective approaches are made. Teachers must be involved at these local as well as at national levels. If teachers could be led to analyse their own behaviour, they would soon require change from themselves and others. This has been the lesson of the Graded Objectives schemes - that is what teachers did and their conversion was rapid and dramatic. It was an enormous consciousness-raising exercise and that,

above all, is what we need first, otherwise teachers will just not be receptive to any new knowledge that research might discover. If research results are to be disseminated and trusted, they must start where teachers are, in classrooms, and they must involve teachers from the start, in the experimental design, in the collection of data, in the interpretation of that data. Then teachers themselves will begin to see the methodological, organisational and other implications. Without that teacher involvement I do not think we will get very far at all.

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